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ABSTRACT

A curriculum project is described that consists of a unit developed for a writing class in a secondary English-as-a-Second-Language (ESL) classroom. Although the unit is intended to present an idea of what can be accomplished in the ESL classroom with developing writers, it does not give any specific "recipes" for writing development. The setting in which the unit was taught was a beginning/intermediate reading and writing class at an urban senior high school with 17 students aged 15-21 in grades 9-11, all but one of whom were Hmong. Dialogue journal writing and narrative writing were used as the primary activities. Student writing samples are included. (LB)

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Finding a Voice: Secondary Students Write Their Stories

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INTRODUCTION

The following curriculum project consists of a unit I developed for a writing class in a secondary ESL classroom. Although this unit is intended to give the reader an idea of what can be accomplished in the ESL classroom with developing writers, it will not provide any specific "recipes" for writing development. Individual teachers and students, which vary from class to class in their needs, should set their own direction and determine their own process to be followed. What will be included as part of the unit, however, is a description of the setting in which I taught, the rationale which guided me, the objectives, and the process that was followed. I will also include a few samples of the end result of the students' writing efforts, a "published" book of their stories.

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SETTING

The unit was created for an ESL beginning/intermediate reading and writing class at an urban senior high school. There were 17 students in the class ranging in age from 15-21 and in grades from 9-11. All of the students were Hmong with the exception of one Cambodian who dropped out of school and did not complete the class. There were three women and fourteen men. Students were at varying levels of English proficiency. The majority of the students had arrived in this country within the last two years with the longest resident having been here almost six years. With the exception of English classes taught in Thailand or Laos, all the students began their formal education upon arrival to the U.S. Before teaching this class, I observed the students four times a week for two weeks. My cooperating teacher advised me to work on a writing unit with the students since writing is such an important skill for academic survival in the mainstream. Prior to my taking over the class, students had written daily in journals on topics given to them by their teacher. In order to gain information on their current level of writing proficiency I read over their journals and have included some samples of their writing below, reproduced exactly as they were written by the students:

> *"When I first meet some one I want he or her to know about my self. I want to meet everybody and to be friend with they and to be nice to they. I want to finish nigh school and go to college to become a doctor and to help people. I really want to go to college..."*

> *"In 1975 I has 6 years old. I am and my family live in Laos. 1976 I am a boy take care a horse and lawn my father work in the farm my sister and brother go to school they are study Laos language I am no go to school because my city don't have school young children 6 years old. I am go to take care my father horse and lawn one day my father teach me study ride horse. but first time I don't ride. The horse run and jumping I am fell down in the floor. When I study ride horse I have 7 years old."*

> *"Something that I have done is pround of my product rice. When I was pround in Laos. Something that I was pround in Laos it was Rice, Cucumbers, and corn. When I was product rice of field far away so long times. So that one day my friends and I went to the field we seem many cucumbers in the field. So that my friend and I were very happyed of the cucumbers it*

was pround of the field four years ago. Thank you."

"In this class they are all my class mates. In this class they are good friends of my I like this class. Because some people are girl but the most people are boys I think in class I have one guy is my good friend but they are all also my friends too.they are my friend too but not sure. In this class mates we never get angry eather we are good eather. Some people we had the same class some thing we don't know we to slow eather. Because we are good friends."

It was evident that the students were at vastly different levels of writing. Some were capable of clearly expressing their thoughts and ideas on paper while others had difficulty conveying a coherent message to the reader. I felt intimidated by this. I wasn't sure where to start with the very beginning writers and was uncertain how to manage all the different levels of writers. The second observation that I made, however, was encouraging: the students had a *lot* to say. They had written so many different things about themselves in their journals that I was beginning to get a glimpse into their world as students, refugees, parents, and young adults. The entries in their journals were not well developed, however; all their thoughts had been written in bits and pieces. The idea that I could somehow get them to develop these bits and pieces was exciting!

RATIONALE

When I began to plan what I'd be doing with this class for the next four weeks, I decided that I should start by writing about my "philosophy" on writing. It struck me that despite the writing classes I had taken, the writing texts I had studied, and all the rules of writing that had been bestowed on me, writing is not a linear process that can easily be taught--if it can be *taught* at all. The process varies with each writer and is very personal. It's a process that has to be *learned*. I reflected on how many different types of writing I had done and how I had, sometime in college, really begun to understand my particular writing process. This was a skill I had developed. It had not been taught to me. I knew that in this class I was working with beginning writers in their second language, writers who had not developed writing skills in their first language. I decided to stick to some basic premises to guide me through this process. The following thoughts are not all original but are ideas which I've either come across in readings or have developed in my own journey in writing. Much of what I have put down here comes from what people have called a holistic or whole language approach. Whatever the label, my approach included the following basic assumptions:

1. The process of acquiring language will come naturally when students are engaged in activities that are stimulating, interesting, and meaningful to them.

2. Students learn to write; they are not taught.

3. Students learn to write best when given a lot of opportunity to write in class.

4. Writing should be meaningful, purposeful, and communicative; it should be real.

5. Writing for meaning first rather than form should be emphasized. This is not to say that form should be ignored but rather it should be secondary to meaning in the early stages of the writing process.

6. Writing is a process. Students' writings should not be viewed as final, end products. There should be many opportunities for revision and rewriting.

7. Students' own culture(s) should be affirmed and explored in the writing process.

8. To learn to write, one has to want to write. A student has to have something that she wants to say to others or herself in order to be able to write. Therefore, topics and ideas for writing should be student generated.

9. A supportive, non-punitive environment should be created in the classroom so that students will be encouraged to write and take risks.

10. Language is not a mass of independent and separate skills. Therefore, writing does not have to be "the last skill mastered" but can be developed at the same time other skills are being developed.

11. Technical, mechanistic approaches found in many writing texts should be avoided. Too many rules may end up blocking the creative process and prevent students from taking risks.

12. It is easier for students to write about things that they have experienced.

PROCEDURE/ACTIVITIES

There were two main "activities" used in this unit: dialogue journal writing and narrative writing. The first "activity" I focused on was the dialogue journals. Students wrote every day for 15 minutes (at least) in their journals. I, in return, responded to their journals never making any error corrections or any evaluative statements but always responding to the message conveyed. Occasionally this was difficult but there was always something in the student's entry that I could respond to. We did this at the beginning of each hour. I quickly discovered how much they appreciated my reading and responding to their entries. Many thanked me in their journals and expressed gratitude every time I asked about them, their families, their history, or their culture. The allotted 15 minutes of journal writing each day quickly and often became 20 minutes. Students were truly experiencing real writing and enjoying it. Because I gave them no topics to write on, but rather an opportunity to write on anything they would like, I had expected some confusion and some resistance from the students. Out of 17 students, only one ever seemed to have difficulty coming up with a topic to write on. Interestingly enough, he was the student who had spent a decidedly longer period of time in this country in our school system (six years versus the average two years). He always asked me what I wanted him to write about and didn't seem satisfied when I told him that this journal was for him and that he had the power to choose his own topics. Other students simply continued the "dialogue" which we had started, or would write about any of a number of topics including family, friends, school, Hmong culture, and favorite movies. I usually had to ask the class two or three times to finish up in their journals and turn them in to me.

As the weeks passed, I know that they had accomplished the following through dialogue journal writing:

- a learned enjoyment of writing,
- an understanding that writing can have a meaning and purpose,
- an environment that was non-punitive and supportive,
- an opportunity for them to generate their own ideas and direction in writing, and
- a consistent opportunity to write.

The journal also served an added purpose for me. Through the use of these daily, personal exchanges I got to know these students in ways I never could have had we not used journals. It also allowed me to learn of areas of interest shared by the students which could provide a good context in which to continue

our writing. This leads me to the next major project.

NARRATIVE WRITING

In our first few meetings as a class I had the students complete short writing assignments. These assignments usually consisted of interviewing a classmate to find out certain things about him or her and then writing three or four paragraphs. To help them get started, we would simulate an "interview" and write a few paragraphs together on the board as a model. Generally these types of writing activities went well but they were always clouded by the fact that the students needed to write three or four paragraphs or that they had to find out certain information. In other words I felt like there was a lot of blockage to the students' creative writing process. They were concerned about writing what I wanted them to write and worried that they somehow weren't meeting my expectations.

I decided to use one of the topics consistently brought up in their journal writing: the story of their history and culture. I brought in a book that had been written in 1982 by ESL students in St. Paul and edited by Sandra Hall, *Voices Over the Water*. I had been reading entries in dialogue journals that reminded me of the stories that I had read in this book. I wanted to figure out a way that I could use *Voices Over the Water* to help these students to write.

READING STORIES

I began one day by reading a story from the book on schools in Laos. It generated a lot of laughter from the students as well as some of their own recollections of their own school experiences in Laos and Thailand. They begged me to read more. I randomly chose another story written by a Hmong student some of them knew. It touched on some pretty horrible events in his life and I all of a sudden wasn't sure whether I should continue with the reading. I looked up from the text at my students and every eye in the room was on me. I asked them if they wanted me to continue. Unanimously they said yes. That day they wouldn't let me stop reading the stories. Many began telling of their own similar experiences. When the bell rang a couple of students came up to me and asked if they could borrow the book to show to their families at home. Instead I made copies of several stories for them and eventually ordered some copies of *Voices Over the Water* from the district office so that they could read the stories themselves.

DISCOVERING A CONTEXT

The next day I gave them the copies I had made of many of the stories. I thought that based on the response I had witnessed to *Voices Over the Water*, it

would be a good idea for them to write their own book. I brought up the idea to the class. They were almost skeptical when I talked to them about making their own book. We spent some time talking about audience and who might read this book that they were beginning to create. The students came up with all sorts of ideas about the audience: American students (with whom many wanted to become friends), other teachers at their school, their families, and their friends. They also knew that it would be something that they could keep for a long time for themselves so that they would never forget all their experiences and memories. I then asked the students to start thinking of what story they would like to tell to others. A few students started writing right away and others read. By the end of the hour everyone was writing. The only instruction that I gave them was to try to write as much as they could--the longer the better. I wanted to make sure that the students had a lot to work with. I thought that this could be the perfect context in which to work on the skills of writing. It turned out to be just that!

Thus began our journey. What a difference it made that these students were writing about something that was important to them. I got the feeling after seeing the outpouring of stories that they had never had the opportunity to write about their past or what they had always collectively referred to as "Hmong culture." I was thrilled to see their commitment to this project.

RESPONDING TO STUDENTS

After students had written their story and it was considered by them to be complete, I would take it home and read it. I never corrected errors in these early stages but I asked (or wrote) a lot of questions on their drafts. The most important thing at this stage was to make sure that the reader understood what was going on. I also tried to have their peers edit for meaning. Without exception, however, the student whose job it was to edit, pronounced every story read as being "perfect." I knew that this was another area that needed development! I brought in writing samples from another class I was teaching, put them on the overhead projector, and as a class exercise tried to teach the students what to look for when editing. Whether the reason was cultural in nature, or not, peer editing did not work with this particular group of Hmong students. If I had had more time perhaps they would have become more comfortable in critiquing their classmates' papers. As it was, I ended up being the main source of editing, occasionally with the help of the student-author. The process was a long one but the students always were eager and ready to continue with their stories. After a couple of drafts that focused on getting their story across to the reader, we began to focus more on technical issues. Many of the mistakes made were made by all the students. Each day we would go over these in class to help students know what to look for in their own paper. Many of the more advanced students began to recognize their own common errors and correct themselves. With each new draft

the errors became fewer. At the end of our process, the students' stories ranged from several handwritten pages long to only a paragraph or two.

THE BOOK

The last step was to put the stories together in the form of a book. As a class, we brainstormed on the chalkboard all the things that needed to be done to make this a complete book. The suggestions included illustrations, a title, a table of contents, and a cover. That day we formed groups to deal with each of these issues. Each group was responsible for coming up with something to present to the class the following day. We would then as a class make decisions on our book. The title group came up with four suggestions which were put to a vote. The table of contents group had recorded everyone's story title along with the author's name and had put them into an order which they thought was acceptable. The group which was in charge of illustrations decided, along with me, that everyone's picture should be included. We needed only to vote on the cover illustration. After this was done, we essentially had completed their book. All that remained was to have it typed and bound. The last two tasks were my responsibilities. If there had been more time, I would have made at least the actual compiling of the books a class activity. In some settings perhaps students could have helped with the typing.

On my last day of teaching, I came to class with the bound books. Although the students knew that the end product was to be a "published" book, they really were surprised to see it in its final form. Many couldn't believe that this was theirs to keep. They thanked me over and over again. I tried to tell them that this was their doing and that I had only acted as the facilitator. My cooperating teacher had the class that day write a letter to me telling me what they thought of the books. I guess this was for me the most important feedback I could get. I've included several of their comments below.

> *"I think the book that we wrote was interested and It was a great story of our Hmong culture, customs, and lives. And I thought that some story in this book was very fun and some was very sad. However, I love to read this book and I'll keep it forever."*

> *"I think the book is very good and the stories that we wrote are very good, too. I feel godd to write the story. I feel good that I can make a story by myself. I think all of them will feel good about themselves that they made the story by themselves, too"*

> *"I think this book is very important for me, because I studied long time ago no teacher whom want me to make my own*

story like you. I very happy that you really want to help me how to write about my story."

"I think this book is very good because it's telling about our Hmong culture in the past. It's good for us to keep and remember what are we writing about."

"March 16, 1990 I had recieve the story that had been written by my classmates and me. I was very happy, because I think it will be memory of my country. I will keep the book as good as possible."

THREE STORIES

A Sad Story About My Parents

I remember when we were in Laos. I was the oldest in my family. My mom and my dad were married in 1973. My dad was a soldier, his name was Xai. When he got married to my mom he was 17 years old. My mom was 15 years old. After he got married to my mom, in 1975, there was a war in Laos. My dad went to fight. My dad told my mom that he would come back to my mom but he was killed in the war.

When my mom heard about that she was so mad because my mom and dad were only married for a year. My mom missed him so much but our cousin told my mom that there were a lot of men that wanted to marry her.

When my cousin buried my father, my mom didn't even know that she was pregnant. She felt tired and she didn't want to eat. Then my mom's mom thought that maybe my mom was pregnant. Pretty soon she delivered her first baby. That baby was me.

When I grew up I never knew who my father was. During that time my mom still lived with my grandmother. My mom got married when I was eight months old. When I got older I asked my grandmother if I had a father or not. My grandmom told me that my father was killed in May, 1975.

In 1976, our cousin asked my mom to marry my father's brother. She told them that if his brother wanted to marry her then she would marry him. Not long ago they were divorced because they didn't love each other. Then my mom married another man when we were in Thailand.

I am so mad about it because my mom and my dad were just married. Sometime I think about my dad. I want to see him and I don't want to live in this world with out a father.

10th Grader

My Life in the Past

I am writing about my life in the past. When I was in Laos I was five years old. We had eleven people in my family. We had a lot of animals but we didn't have a lot of money to buy clothes and shoes so we sold some animals to some people for money. After we sold the animals we had some money to buy clothes and shoes.

In 1975, my brother got married and we didn't have enough money to pay for the wedding so my father gave the animals to my brother's wife's mother and father to eat for the wedding. He gave them about six cows, two pigs, and twenty five chickens. After they got the animals, my brother's wife came to live with us.

After my brother got married, the communists came to shoot all the men in my country, so we ran away. We had no place to live so we lived in the mountains and in the forest. We didn't have enough food for my family and not enough water to drink. It was summer time and there was little water. We were so thirsty and hungry. When my father went back to our home, the two hundred animals were very hungry and thirsty and they all cried to my father. After that my father came back from our home. My father brought some water and rice to us. After a couple of weeks we didn't have any more rice or water. My father couldn't go back to our home because the communists were shooting everybody in my neighborhood.

On February 2, 1976, we went to Vientiane. When we got to the river of Vientiane my father got killed by the communists and we were very sad. My mother cried all the time because my mother missed my father so much. After we were in Vientiane for one month my mother died so we went back home. At that time the communists were back in their country.

When we got to our home, it looked very old. Some animals were still around our home. We didn't have money then because when my mother died we spent a lot of money for her funeral. So we sold all the animals to our neighbors. After we sold the animals we went to Thailand.

When we escaped to Thailand we didn't have any food to eat so we almost died. When the Thai people saw us they gave food to us to eat. We lived there for

two weeks and then we went to live in Ban Vinai. We lived in Ban Vinai for nine years and then we came to the United States. When we got to the United States we were very happy because we didn't get killed by the communists. I think I will never forget the communists!

9th Grader

Laos and Thailand

We lived in Vientiane in Laos for twelve years. After twelve years we fled to Thailand. We were starving in Thailand and we didn't have enough money to buy food. We wrote a letter to my mother-in-law and to other people in the United States. They sent us some money to buy clothes and food. We had nine people in our family in Thailand. We had a lot of cousins in California. They also sent us some money. We lived in Thailand for three years. Each year we got one shirt and one pair of pants. Our parents just wore the same clothes every year because we were very poor.

I was little kid, about eight years old, but I remember all the things we did in Laos. My parents lived on a farm. When my parents came home, my uncles and my dad went hunting in the forest for two and a half days. Then they came back and brought some baby animals and the mothers home. We took care of them. After the baby animals grew up we let them go to find their home. We didn't want to hurt them because they were very nice animals but I was scared of them. One day I and my brother went to the farm. I saw a nest of leaves on the ground. It had a crow in it. I saw the mother fly to get things for her baby birds. Then I told my brother about where I saw the birds and how they were. My brother said not to tell anybody. "If you tell someone the crow might hear what you have said." The next day I went to see if the eggs were all gone in the nest.

In Laos I had four brothers and one sister. I always took them with me. We went to the forest and took walks for a few minutes to see the animals. The animals walked around us and played near us. Then we went to the mountain. We saw animals, trees, bamboo, and a lot of things--a waterfall, too. We played there for thirty minutes, then we came home. My parents said to go get water for them because they were tired. The lake was so far from our house but we had to get the water from the lake. If we didn't get it, we wouldn't have water at home.

At that place where we lived, my grandparents died at midnight. The ghost came to get them. After that we left this place and moved to another place. We went to live at the farm We never will come back to this place again because if we come again maybe I would die, too. I'll never see this country again.

9th Grader

THE AUTHOR

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